

In the subsequent centuries, major *advaita* (non-dualist) philosophers like Adi Shankara (eighth century) and theologians like Ramanuja (eleventh century) wrote commentaries on *prasthāntarāyī* to establish their schools of thought.

#### NARRATIVES

Of all the Sanskrit texts originating in the ancient period, two epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – as well as a myriad of stories about deities contained in the Puranas have been most integrated in the lives of average Hindus for centuries. These texts interweave narratives from priestly, bardic, and regional traditions that may have been in oral circulation much earlier. Even today, people generally do not read the narratives but listen to them in regional versions. There are indeed hundreds of retellings of these narratives with diverse interpretations. A vast majority of Hindu children get their early religious lessons through these stories.

The narrative texts emerged when the Vedic culture was facing major challenges from other traditions. If the *dharma* treatises responded to the challenges by defining moral obligations of people, the narrative texts did so in three important ways. First, characters in them provided examples of how to engage with issues of *dharma*. Second, they contributed to the development of the pantheon of deities who have been widely worshipped by Hindus for centuries. And third, they democratized the tradition by popularizing the path of *bhakti*, which, unlike Vedic rituals or mystical knowledge, was open to all. Over the centuries, they have indeed provided Hindu communities what Gananath Obeyesekere has termed “myth models,” filters to distill meanings from human experience. They have also provided the basis for numerous literary, visual, and performing arts in classical and folk traditions. When Hindu traditions traveled to South-East Asia in the early Common Era, the narratives formed a major channel for their integration into local cultures, often through sculptures and performing arts that are popular even today. Additionally, the settings of the narratives allowed various locales of the subcontinent to be integrated into Hindu pilgrimage networks.

#### The Epics

Two epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – are considered revered by Hindus and are traditionally classified as *itihāsa* (“so indeed it happened”). Of these, the *Ramayana*, attributed to sage Valmiki, is 24,000 verses long. It tells the story of the righteous prince Rama of Ayodhya who accepts a 14-year long exile from his kingdom on the eve of his coronation in order to enable his father to fulfill a promise made to his stepmother. In exile, Rama is accompanied by his wife Sita and brother Lakshman. Sita, whom King Janaka had found in a furrow and raised as a princess, is extremely beautiful. She is abducted from their forest hut and kept captive for months by the ten-headed king Ravana. But she refuses to submit to Ravana’s demands. Rama and Lakshman go looking for her. On the way, they befriend valiant forest dwellers and monkeys who help them find her and fight as Rama’s army in the subsequent battle against Ravana. Hanuman, their chief, becomes an ardent devotee of Rama. When Ravana is slain and Rama is victorious, Sita approaches Rama happily; but he asks her to prove her chastity. Sita enters fire; and the fire deity, Agni, brings her back unharmed testifying to her chastity. Rama, Sita, and Lakshman return to Ayodhya and Rama is crowned the king. The final turn is introduced in the last book of the epic, which is generally seen as a later addition. Soon after the coronation, on hearing rumors about Sita’s time in Ravana’s city circulating among his subjects, Rama banishes a pregnant Sita to the forest. Here, sage Valmiki, the author of the epic, gives her shelter in his hermitage. Sita gives birth to twin sons – Luv and Kush – and raises them there. Valmiki recites them his poem, the *Ramayana*, which they recite in Rama’s city Ayodhya at the performance of a major sacrifice. Rama recognizes his sons, Valmiki brings Sita in front of Rama who is moved to see her. But Sita does not want to return. She asks the earth, her mother (since she was found in a furrow), to accept her back. The ground splits and Sita disappears into it.

The *Ramayana* is focused on the issue of *dharma* of a son, a king, a wife, a brother, a friend, etc. But it also deals with complex moral dilemmas faced by the characters and does not portray any of them as blemish-free. Rama’s choices in a few incidents have been a

matter of debates. His asking Sita to prove her purity and abandoning her when pregnant, which led to her poignant return to mother earth are two such incidents. On the other hand, Ravana, even though arrogant and boastful, is portrayed to have some good qualities. He does not force himself on Sita, is immensely learned and a great devotee of Shiva. His fatal flaw is arrogance. The issues of *dharma* in the *Ramayana* continue to be debated in public discourses, writings, and performances within Hindu communities and by non-Hindus in India and outside of it. The debates among Hindus highlight that diverse perspectives are valid in the Hindu ethos. People may bitterly disagree; but critiquing Rama's behavior is not sacrilege. In addition to being a resource for *dharma* related issues, the *Ramayana* is one of the most significant texts for *bhakti* traditions. There are millions of ardent devotees of Rama, who is often seen flanked by Sita, and Laxman in his iconography. Equally popular is Hanuman, seen as divine because of his devotion, even though taking a monkey body. Deep attachment to Rama however has become a part of sharp political debates in recent decades, which we will look at later.

The other epic, attributed to sage Dwaipayana Vyasa, is the *Mahabharata*. Arguably the longest epic in the world, it is almost five times as long as the *Ramayana* and even a more complex net of stories involving *dharma* choices. The main narrative is about rivalry between two sets of cousins — 100 Kauravas and 5 Pandavas — to inherit a powerful kingdom. The Kauravas refuse to share power with the Pandavas and put them through a series of life-threatening ordeals including a long exile imposed through a tricky game of gambling. Contributing vitally to the complexity of the tale is the role of princess Draupadi, who is married to all five Pandavas. She is enraged when Kauravas drag her to their court and attempt to strip her during the game as a bet and is determined to avenge her insult. Pandavas lose everything and are forced to exile. After many years in exile, the Pandavas enter an epic battle with the Kauravas with Krishna (worshipped as another incarnation of Vishnu) on their side, not as a warrior but as an advisor. After a devastatingly destructive war, the Pandavas emerge victorious but are gripped with a deep sense of loss. In the end, as they embark on their last journey to

heaven along with Draupadi, each of them, except the eldest Yudhishthira, is made to confront his/her flaws before he/she falls. There are hundreds of stories surrounding the main plot, each presenting a moral dilemma faced by a character. Here too, no character is painted as perfect.

Moral choices and their consequences are presented with stark realism and a range of possibilities in the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi, a princess, marries five brothers to follow the word of their mother. On the other hand, another princess, Amba, rebels when pressured to marry a man she does not love. She turns an ascetic, gets reborn as a prince with fluid gender, and becomes instrumental in the death of the person who had abducted her in the previous life. Some choices of various characters align with injunctions of the *dharma śāstras*, and some do not. In several situations, the choices of authoritative figures are questioned or shown in poor light. In the episode where Draupadi is being dragged into the court by the Kauravas, she sharply questions the male elders of the family for choosing loyalty to the throne over their duty to protect a woman. In another subplot, Ekalavya, a young forest-dweller who excels in archery, is tricked by the royal teacher Drona (a Brahmin) whom he considers his guru. On discovering Ekalavya's extraordinary skills, Drona asks Ekalavya to give him his (Ekalavya's) right thumb as his fee. This is a trick to ensure that Arjun, one of the Pandavas, remains the greatest archer in the world. As Ekalavya devotedly cuts his thumb, the cruelty of the Brahmin teacher and the nobility of the forest-dweller (considered low caste) become transparent. This story is told with myriad different interpretations. A Dalit leader, for example, recently commented that in cutting his thumb, Ekalavya, though showing nobility, allowed Drona to hit at the source of his skills.

Heard in summary or piecemeal, the epics are seen by average Hindus as important sources of guidance regarding moral choices. But as narratives, they provide no straightforward injunctions. They rather present diverse situations, which reinforce the idea that while some values such as kindness, truthfulness, etc. are universal, moral decisions are often complex and must be made in view of their contexts. Within a complex web of such stories, however, there is one important interlude in the *Mahabharata*, generally

thought to be a later addition, that is regarded as a core Hindu text – the famous *Bhagavad Gita*.

### *The Bhagavad Gita*

Of all the Hindu sacred texts, the *Bhagavad Gita* (“the song of the Lord”) or the *Gita* (BG now on) is the best known worldwide. Perhaps the author/s of BG inserted it into the *Mahabharata* because of the epic’s popularity. Like the Upanishads, this text is in the form of a dialog. It clearly tries to synthesize all major philosophical/spiritual ideas prevalent at the time. A large majority of its 700 verses, divided into 18 chapters, are about various perspectives on the real nature of the self, its relation to the divine, the nature of the Ultimate, and the characteristics of a spiritually advanced person. The text lays out three paths of spiritual advancement – undertaking action for the fulfillment of duties without attachment to results (*niskāma karma*), surrender to the divine will in devotion (*bhakti*), and knowledge of the self (*jñāna*) – which are still seen as major religious paths by Hindus.

Along with the ideas it contains, the narrative context of BG also demands attention. It is placed in the epic when the battle is about to begin. Arjun, the mightiest warrior on the Pandava side, is overcome by dejection at the prospect of killing relatives and friends. He expresses his doubts to Krishna, his guide. In the dialog that follows, Krishna advises Arjun to give up his doubts arising out of confusion and fulfill his *dharma* as a warrior by fighting for what is right. The text ends with Arjun saying, “I will do as you say.” Because of this narrative context, some readers interpret BG as advocating war and being apathetic to destruction. Yet millions who turn to it as a source of spiritual guidance, see the narrative context of the battle only as a symbol of the inner struggle of a person, which highlights the spiritual message of the text. They view Krishna’s exhortation to Arjun to fight not as a justification for war but as a call to perform one’s duty without any expectation of a reward. In a lecture I attended, a teacher of BG said, “It is important to keep in mind that Krishna asks Arjun, a warrior who has already arrived on the battlefield, to fight and not an ordinary citizen. Arjun here is like the commander-in-chief of an army

refusing to perform his job. He has to be exhorted to fulfill his duty.” Because of the understanding that BG’s teaching is about performing righteous action without attachment to its fruits, it is regarded as a pivotal sacred text by most Hindus. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, many Hindus were exchanging verses from it on social media channels discussing the need to introspect on collective *karma* and perform one’s duty in the battle against the virus.

### THE PURANAS

Along with the epics, the other core narrative texts of Hinduism are the Puranas, a truly large corpus. These texts were composed over several centuries beginning in the early Common Era. Eighteen Puranas are considered *Mahāpurāṇas* (great Puranas) and are attributed to the same legendary sage Vyasa to whom the *Mahabharata* is ascribed. They are encyclopedic in scope and generally weave five themes – cosmogony, dissolution and recreation of the world in a cyclical manner within vast expanses of time spanning millions of years, life on earth during these cycles, myths about deities and their worshippers, and genealogies and deeds of royal dynasties. Several widely prevalent Hindu ideas about how humans and deities are situated within these cycles of creation and dissolution derive from these texts.

Manu, the name of the progenitor of mankind in Hindu belief, also appears in the Puranas. Here, it is the title of the upholder of the world whose lifetime spans thousands of years within cycles of time. As per the conception of time presented in the Puranas, lifetimes of 14 Manus make one iteration of creation with its own distinct deities. During the lifetime of each Manu, the world goes through a cycle of four eons (*yugas*) – *krta/satya*, *trētā*, *dvāpar*, and *kali* – each of several thousand years. In a cycle of this type, called *mahāyuga*, there is gradual moral degradation from the first eon, *krta*, which is marked by moral uprightness of people. The cycles of human rebirths are set within this complex schema of time. Hindus often find explanations for moral corruption in the world today by associating it with the current degenerate *kali-yuga*. Generally, a Purana presents *bhakti* to the deity at its center as the